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ABSTRACT

To examine the impact of old age upon an individual's sense of self we must look at the enduring self. An understanding of selfhood or self-consciousness can only be found by reference to the social activity of the individual. The interactional part of the self involves the individual in two forms of active social behavior, subject and object. The subjective form of self presents the self to others, while the objective form observes, interprets, and organizes reality as it is perceived. The interactional self experiences itself through three types of feedback loops: (1) nonsignificant reactive interactions; (2) self-awareness through role taking; and (3) inner consciousness of the objective self through external patterns of social interaction. The goal of the third level of feedback is adaptation to new social situations. In order for optimal development and maintenance of the self to occur a number of processes must operate throughout the lifespan. Two of these processes are role taking and social comparison. For the elderly, inaccurate role taking may occur due to a discrepancy between self-conception and social definitions. The social forces in an ageist society and the temporal dimension demand readjustment in self-conception. The response is an internal role taking in which the self in its prime is used as a referent. This internal role taking is a dynamic process that involves not only the conscious inner dialogue that produces awareness of self as object but also the interaction between self and former self. Ultimately, the degree of internal role taking varies from culture to culture according to the relative status of the elderly in different societies. Where old age is a valued status, role taking may remain largely external, using feedback from the environment. The concept of internal role taking can help clarify our understanding of the difficulties of socialization to a devalued position in old age. (BL)

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ADAPTATION TO AGING: THE MAINTENANCE OF SELF*

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> We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning, for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true, will at evening have become a lie. I have given psychological treatment to too many people of advancing years, and have looked too often into the secret chambers of their souls, not to be moved by this fundamental truth...
>
> Carl Gustav Jung
> "Modern Man in Search of a Soul"

The change and development of the self throughout a human life is a dramatic and exciting process. Each one of us is unique in our responses to all the major stages of life, youth, mid-life, old age, and as we go through our "day" both our presentational and our inner selves will respond to the time of that day and to its ongoing events and interactions. We cannot indeed live our lives at any stage according to the priorities and concerns of an earlier stage in robot-like response. But within Jung's insight I believe we may ask, what is the relationship between the afternoon of life and the evening--a dyad that he did not include. To us, the afternoon means the prime of life. The time that in retrospect appears to each one of us as our best in self-concept and capabilities. We examine this question from formulations of George Herbert Mead and Ralph Turner. For the purpose of our construct, we assume an ageist social context and also a loss of significant social contacts for ageing individuals.

The Interactional Self

In this paper our concern is with the processual nature of self in a social context and the impact of old age upon the individual's sense of self. We do not focus upon the more volatile nature of self-esteem, but rather our interest lies in the enduring, general self. Not Goffman's (1959) presentational self, nor Sorokin's (1947) formulation of a separate self in differing social contexts, but a concept of an enduring self that is an individual's wholistic description of themselves (George, 1980). Nor is it an average of multiple selves or self-images, but a reflexive self. According to George Herbert Mead, the reflexive self is that which can be both subject and object. Human social interaction enables us to become objects to ourselves. Thus an understanding of selfhood or self-consciousness can only be found by reference to the social activity of the individual. Furthermore, reason itself is not complete unless an individual enters into the same experiential fields as those with whom he or she interacts (Strauss, 1977). But reason must become impersonal and this cannot occur unless:

> ...it takes an objective non-affective attitude toward itself: otherwise we just have consciousness, not self-consciousness. (Strauss, 1977, p. 202).

Thus, in order for rational behavior to occur it is essential that the individual develops this objective attitude toward self. Additionally, we respond to our own behavior by using the attitudes of others. The

self is first of all a role-taker. It arises out of its own unique ability to take on the attitude of the group. The attitudes of the social group give the individual his or her unity of self and is known as the "generalized other."

Wait (1983) contends that Mead developed three models of the self: the phenomenological model based on the work of William James, the interactional self, and lastly a causal model of self. Of these, he argues that the interactional self "represents Mead's unique and most valuable contribution to self theory" (p. 3).

Possession of an interactional self involves the individual in two forms of active social behavior. The individual addresses the world as an "I": speaking, acting, and presenting the self to others. At the same time the individual is an active receiver of information about the world; thus the interactional self also involves a "me" not just as object of thought, but rather, a "me" as observer that interprets, perceives, listens and organizes the reality that is taken in. Wait emphasizes the dynamic, processual nature of this concept of self by showing that the self experiences itself through feedback loops from "I" to "me." The interactional self contains three types of feedback. The first involves non-significant reactive interaction of person with other. The second includes taking, through role-taking, the attitude of the other toward self and thus becoming self-aware. Lastly, the interactional self is characterized by a very particular type of feedback:

> ...(it) involves a conscious inner dialogue between "I" and "me". This inner dialogue produces full awareness of the self as an object...The "I" and "me" of inner conversation have their origins in the ex ternal, observable patterns of social interaction in which an individual engages (Wait, 1983, pp. 7-8).

Thus we are capable of interpreting and reflecting not only on the meanings and attitudes of others, but also of self.

This "inner conversation" or reflective thought does not occur during habitual behavior but rather in problematic social contexts. The goal of reflective thought is adaptation to a new situation. It is a dramatic encounter and not just a stimulus-response process. In this encounter the individual "...weigh(s) the interests of self against the interests of others...(and) organizes future behavior" (p. 12).

Role-taking and Comparative Processes

A number of processes must operate in order to allow for the optimal development and maintenance of self. We will focus on two namely, role-taking and social comparison.

Through their play and games children become increasingly expert at adopting social viewpoints. In normal development role-taking must be as accurate as possible, thus permitting a true image of self to emerge. The reactions of significant others are particularly important, but so too is the ability to take on the attitude of a variety of others. Thus, as the ability to think abstractly is achieved, so to is the attitude of the generalized other taken on.

The interactional self that is developed and maintained through role-taking contains notions of comparative standing. The personal impact of experiences depends upon the outcome of comparative processes. We cannot study their impact without understanding the bases of the comparisons made by individuals and, therefore, the meanings they make of their experiences. An individual gains a more accurate view of self

through comparison with others in similar and different circumstances. The process includes the "inner conversation" feedback since it involves evaluation done by self to self in comparison to others.

Both role-taking and comparative processes are ongoing throughout the lifespan since an individual needs to be open to new information about self in order to best adapt to changes in the social environment and life circumstances.

Social psychologists within reference group research have investigated the outcomes of the comparative aspect of role-taking (Parker and Kleimer, 1968). One general finding was that individuals who compare themselves with dissimilar others with negative results may experience feelings of stress, personal failure, self-derogation, and "relative deprivation" (Hyman, 1942). One might conclude that for older people using middle-aged persons as a reference group could lead to a lower morale and self-esteem. Thus, one expectation of the aging sub-culture as envisioned by Rose (1965) could be a heightened morale or more positive sense of self.

The latter premise is, however, challenged by one of the most consistently documented findings in gerontological literature, namely, the systematic denial by the elderly that they themselves are old.[1] Elderly persons share the same denigrating attitudes toward the elderly, but they exempt themselves from such social judgments. Rosow (1967) found that only thirty percent of his sample of elderly, non-institutionalized subjects regarded their peers as productive and useful, yet 85 percent believed that they themselves were productive and useful. Similarly, 86 percent agreed with the statement that elderly persons who deny that

they are old are "just kidding themselves" yet, 70 percent then insisted that they themselves were not old. Rosow concludes that this denial reveals a sharp discrepancy between self-conception and social definitions.

Are we perhaps observing a phenomenon of inaccurate role-taking--a condition of benign self-deception? We suggest a model that reflects a change in the direction of role-taking rather than an explantion that verges on the pathological.

Internal Role-taking

As we have already noted, the interactional self is fully active when engaged in reflective thought generated by a novel social situation or condition and incongruent with the ongoing sense of self. Here our focus is confined to stimuli from an ageist society and their impact upon the aging individual. Our view is of a dialectic exchange between the age expectations of society and the individual need to maintain a positive self-concept. Thus the meanings that individuals place upon stimuli are of paramount interest.

As opportunities for social interaction diminish through loss and restricted social contacts, can an individual maintain a self-concept through the processes of role-taking and comparison with others? According to Mead, the self under these circumstances is subject to reduced support, since the external role-taking process, so essential to the creation and maintenance of self has been curtailed. Therefore we ask: to what extent do aging individuals make use of external feedback as an indicator of their "real" self?

Individuals make comparisons with others, both similar and dissimilar, but they also make comparisons with themselves at an earlier age. The former self is involved as referrent other. The degree to which this is done will vary by personal history and problematic continuity due to decrements with aging. We may be observing a phenomenon in which social stimuli, or the lack thereof, having become incongruent with self causes the role-taking process to turn inward toward an image of a former self.

Turner (1968) describes self-conception as a "vitally felt idea of what I am like in my best moments" (p. 98). This is not an idealized self-concept, but rather one rooted in reality. He notes that for normal development to occur, it is crucial that the idealized view of self should fade away so that a reality-edited self-conception can emerge. The editing process is carried to the point when self-conception will "work" as a basis for social interaction. This is the self-concept that an individual forms so that interaction is predictable and manageable. But, as Turner observes, it relies ultimately for optimal function on its suitability to guide ego's own interpretation of self. An interpretation that is both internally and externally coherent, and an interpretation that stresses capabilities rather than performance as predictors of future behavior. The temporal setting of human action necessitates such a basis, yet, herein lies a dilemma for old age and maintenance of self.

For older people, time perspective changes and becomes foreshortened. The ambition to "become" is less relevant, and that which has not yet been achieved will remain forever unaccomplished. The social forces

in an ageist society and the temporal dimension demand readjustment in self-conception.

The response is a turning inward toward the self that coincides with the individual's definition of "my prime of life." We conceive of this former self as a dynamic construct experiencing itself through feeback between the "I" and the "me." A time when self-concept and external circumstances were optimal. Thus the earlier self increasingly becomes the referrent other as the external environment or the generalized other is seen as dysfunctional for the maintenance of self. We term this process "internal role-taking" as opposed to Mead's concept which generally involves ongoing social forms and thus is more externally derived. We suggest that this former self is not an ideal self distorted by memory but rather, the reality-edited self posited by Turner and that this function is essential for normal ageing. The interplay between the present and past selves occurs in reflexive thought in the conversational format described by Mead. Thus the present self increasingly takes on the attitude of the former self rather than the generalized other.

Comparative processes too may turn inward. In a study of young and old subjects, Davis (1967) concluded that social comparisons were of little importance to the older subjects, that their concern was with temporal comparative processes. While we believe that remini cing is a form of temporal comparison that is important for many elderly people, we are suggesting that internal role-taking is a dynamic process that involves not only the conscious inner dialogue that produces awareness of self as object but also the interac tion between self and former

self. Thus we are positing an interactional former self, a self that supports the present self. In the last stages of life a new synthesis of past and present may or may not emerge from the interaction.

We have attempted to construct a flexible model that addresses our central problem of how a positive self-concept is maintained in old age. The degree to which internal role-taking occurs depends upon each individuals's interpretations of reality and the nature of the social context. With regard to the latter, it may be that the degree of internal role-taking will vary from culture to culture according to the relative status of the elderly in different societies. In those societies, for example, where old age is a valued status, role-taking may tend to remain largely external using comparative processes and feedback from the external environment. Thus our discussion of the interactional self and the concept of internal role-taking may perhaps help to clarify our understanding of the process and difficulties of socialization to a devalued position with particular reference to old age.

NOTES

[1]A detailed review of the relevant literature may be found in I. Rosow, Social Integration of the Aged. New York: The Free Press, 1967.

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